

HK\$65/US\$8.50/
C\$8.50/€6/UK£4.50

ASIAN ART NEWS

VOLUME 20 NUMBER 5 SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010



PAN HSINHUA

Robert Piggot * *The Setouchi International Art Festival* * Angelito Antonio * Leang Seckon * Thavorn Ko-udomvit * The Israel Museum * ARTSingapore * Reviews * Auction



universal as well as contextual modes, thus following the trend of many productions of contemporary art nowadays, which have cut off their moorings from the Schools of Paris and New York in order to hew closer to the bone of crucial issues, thus exploring and developing new ways of expression, creating new iconographies in painting infused with related media, more hard-edged and political rather than personal, even surpassing postmodernism, and being more in-this-world than in some ideal realm of eternal and artistic verities. The art of Jana de Asis Benitez, multi-directional as it is, is ripe with the promise of contemporary art at the cutting-edge of the visual.

Alice G. Guillermo

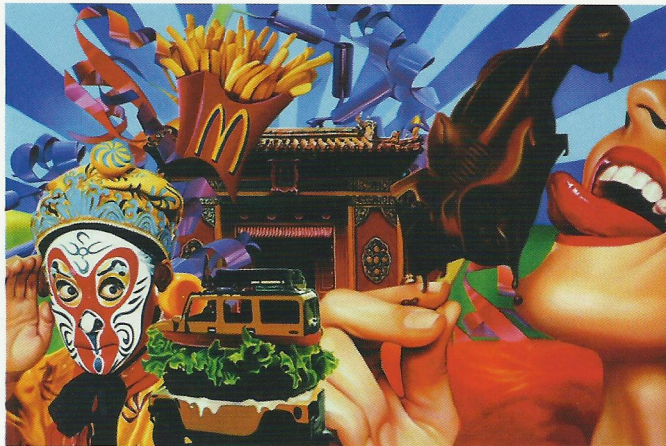
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SINGAPORE

He Jia at Art Seasons

A great deal of the important Chinese art since the early 1990s has been figurative. Iconic figuration, expressed through straightforward realism, sentimental impressionism, dreamy surrealism, and tough neo-expressionism, for example, has been repeated and copied so often by lesser artists for the marketplace that its impact has been diminished. In this digital age, when passable figurative art is often just a computer program away, how does a painter instill a fresh energy into it? How does a painter make one take notice of the figure and its iconic nature? Are there young artists, not swayed by the gimmickry of computer programs, who want to put in the hard graft applying paint to realize strong figurative art within an exciting narrative? The answer is yes: there are many. One such artist is the young Chinese painter He Jia (b. 1976), whose recent first solo Singapore exhibition entitled *Carnival: Paintings and Installation*, flashed energy, humor, surprise, questions.

He Jia's enormous, brilliantly colored oil paintings speak incisively to China's



He Jia, 72 Transformations, 2007, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Image: Courtesy of Art Seasons.

raucous development and to current society's excesses. They are like giant billboards beckoning the traveler on to the serendipitous mysteries of a Chinese Las Vegas or the free-spirited sexuality of new Beijing's and Shanghai's clubland. The context into which He's protagonists fit has an infectious Alice-in-Wonderland dynamism, beauty and ugliness, the ingeniously subtle and the garishly obvious, all of which is delivered in a smooth super-realist style. Where Jia's content is quite close in sentiment to Richard Hamilton's collage entitled *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* (1956), a soft view of the post-World War II American suburban dream, his context is that of an entire country in the throes of change. He's art is really much closer in its visual dynamic to that of such artists as Chuck Close and Richard Estes.

Works such as *72 Transformations* (2007) and *Fire Eye'd Jingjing* (2010) amply display He Jia's narrative power. His concerns, among which are the marginalization of traditional culture and the aggressiveness of brazen soft-porn sexuality of today's urban youth, are in-your-face bold. He has no time to sweeten the truth. In He's world the truth is buried in a confusion of sleights of hand. When it is exposed, it really hurts. The Chinese world is being drugged, drowned, and depleted by consumerist invaders, from drug companies to fast-food restaurants, from gas-guzzling cars to ugly alien

tourists who appear to be gassing and raping the Chinese.

He touches upon numerous positive and negative ingredients in contemporary Chinese society that are wide-open to interpretation either way. But there is no respite in the enormous appetites and energy of his paintings: for this, one has to turn to his butterfly installation, which comprises 700 carefully made stainless-steel butterflies. This work provided a moment of meditative quiet as his massed butterflies drifted gently across the gallery's rear wall. This work also hinted at He's softer, subtler persona than that expressed in his paintings.

Ian Findlay

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The Future of Exhibition: It Feels like I've Been Here Before at Earl Lu Gallery (Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore)

In *The Future of Exhibition: It Feels Like I've Been Here Before* nothing is sacred in a space transformed into a venue of perpetual opening parties. Walking into the gallery visitors encountered a changing exhibition of two barely delineated and intentionally un-captioned works: *7 Days of Creation – You're Late!*, an installation, and a 7-channel CCTV video, and *Time Machine presents...*

In the production of *7 Days of Creation – You're Late!*, artists and friends were invited

to a private opening party held two days before the official opening of the exhibition, with strict instructions not to forward the invite to anyone else, and with a prescribed 'retro' dress-code. The night's playful experience began with the disorientation of guests who had to find their way from the gallery's entrance, through a small unmarked doorway, past a mock storage area with installation debris, to reach the party space, decorated with gold-print curtains, colored lamps, twinkly lights, and styrofoam boxes packed with chilled beer. There they found a stage set up for the live performances of two bands, *The Pinholes* and *The Great Spy Experiment*, who performed late into the night as guests happily twisted and cheered to their music. On the night of the official opening, all this was history. What was left was the detritus and dregs of a successful party, with visitors having to piece the event together from its remnants of empty and crushed beer cans strewn haphazardly, a disco ball slowly running down, texts scribbled on the walls—one stating: "There are no mistakes (sic) in this exhibition," eight lengthy handwritten letters to Snow celloped onto the walls and a couple of Magic 8 Balls (which were subsequently stolen from the installation.) Like detectives, visitors would have to look to themselves to find the answers as to where the artwork was, what had produced the chaos, and, more important, why they had not been there.

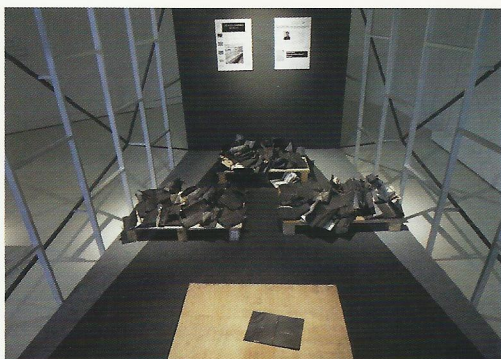
Meeting often over a year in Singapore and Malaysia, Eva McGovern, June Yap, Vincent Leong, Jason Wee, and Roslisham Ismail aka ISE, the co-conspirators of this unconventional exhibition, shared their thoughts on the various anxieties curators or artists usually have, and how these could be explored. They decided to collaborate in an experimental fashion, which would allow them to use notions of time and future projections within the space, employing self-reflexive strategies, thus freeing themselves from expectations of failure or success.

Making a continuous mess all in the name of art is far from acceptable in meticulously clean Singapore (popularly known as the “FINE” city,) much less in a respectable institution for the arts, but the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore at Lasalle kept a reserved, if not open, attitude towards this performative installation-based exhibition.

The work, *Time Machine presents...*, was no less confusing, with its series of seven openings presenting artworks from the past and the future. The pre-opening scheduled before the official opening brought audiences to the past (April 2010, to be precise) with Ang Song Ming's *Do you want to Dance*, an installation with a missing performance, and *Mogwai: Are Shite* with reference to the affront the band Mogwai caused another band, Blur, when they commercially produced T-shirts which stated, 'Blur are shite.'

The *Time machine* then suffered a bumpy ride and coughed up Shubigi Rao's *River of Ink* (2008), and *No cover No color* (2006) created under the pseudonym S. Raoul. The combination of these two works resulted in a memorial for S. Raoul and an installation of books by Shubigi Rao that have lost their identity and history, having been “drowned” in ink by the artist who delights in building elaborate, yet convincing, cultural and historical misinformation for the gullible viewer of the “Information Technology” age.

In the third bout of time travel, conceptual artist Lim Tzay Chuen's intervention *No Aircon* is presented to the viewer from the year 2015, where it will be shown at the *Fourth Singapore Biennale*. The work simply required that the exhibiting space turn off its ventilation system thereby raising the thermostat to its highest temperature. No doubt a reference to writer Cherian George's *Singapore: The Air-Conditioned Nation*, a political analysis of the city-state. It would seem the artist wished to engage with the viewer on social and political ideals that



construct the identity of the city.

A visit to 2016 sees a Felix Gonzales-Torres installation *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991), organized by the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Ross Laycock's death (he died of AIDS-related complications.) Two rows of individually wrapped licorice candy invite the viewer to partake and therefore participate in this tender homage to Gonzales-Torres's lover and companion. The memorial includes a touching note that Gonzales-Torres dedicated to Ross Laycock expressing gratitude for the precious time they spent in each other's company, leaving the spectator unreservedly emotional, moved by issues of mortality and love.

Next, the *Time Machine* conveys to the gallery a work by Heman Chong from the year 2023. Using his trademark vinyl stickers to create two rectangular spaces, their dimensions formed by lengths measured in prime numbers, the combined area of which make up the figure 2666. Here Chong makes aesthetic reference to Roberto Bolaño's three-volume epic of the same title.

The sixth traversal through time brings us to July 2017, where gifts from artists in Singapore for the 1960s conceptual artist Sol LeWitt (1928–2007) have been returned for the duration of this exhibition. The works originally from the exhibition organized by *Cabinet Magazine* and Massachusetts MoCA in 2010, *An Exchange with Sol LeWitt* was of gifts from artists who, in the words of the exhibition curator Regine Basha, “continue to exchange works and ideas, if only symbolically, with him.”

Time Machine takes you to September 2006, Shubigi Rao's *No Cover no Color* (2006) and *River of Ink* (2008), 2010, wood, 50% grey paint (Jotun 9902), silver paint, tension wire, vinyl, and jpg e-invite.

Finally, the *Time Machine* loops back three days before the end of the exhibition duration to 2025, where *The Future of Exhibition* is presented at the Malaya Pavilion of the *61st Venice Biennale*. Curated by June Yap, according to the *Time Machine*, this is apparently the second time Singapore and Malaysia have jointly presented at the *Biennale* having apparently resolved their identity issues, and at long last, an explanation, it seems, is given. “*The Future of Exhibition* is premised on the audience as event, whether it is their belated arrival, their completely missing the party, or their awkward untimeliness at being too early. Timing, after all ‘is everything.’”

Bharti Lalwani

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Hai Rihan at The Luxe Art Museum

Within the ever-changing landscape of contemporary Chinese art the image of Inner Mongolian art is a complex one. There are, in this autonomous region, numerous male and female artists working in a broad

range of media and styles that touch upon both traditional images of the culture and the thoroughly contemporary. There is, for example, Xue Mo's formal portraiture of conspicuously determined women in traditional dress and Su Xinping's enigmatic prints and paintings of stalwart figures on the steppe. Then there is a wide variety of engaging landscape art. Here the horizon appears to stretch to the edge of a tough world where people and animals are but specks of life struggling to exist. Or there are bold horsemen and herdsmen at one with the grasslands keeping ancient traditions alive. Such images present an odd bucolic, even sentimental, vision that has some merit, but captures little of the rough-and-tumble life in Inner Mongolia. Such works catch the eye for their unique statements within contemporary Chinese art, but they rarely travel well. Hai Rihan, however, presents another reality in his recent wide-ranging exhibition entitled *Beyond Logic: The Art of Hai Rihan*.

What is it about Hai's art that is compelling? Firstly, his visual range encompasses a number of styles and techniques that suggest broad study and understanding of the place of art. Secondly, his art is one that is deeply personal. One occasionally finds a suggestion of psychological distress in his vision that can only be assuaged through art. One sees this especially in Hai's brooding works in which he packs wide-eyed faces tightly together as if he wants to hide them from the light, as if the natural place for his personal demons is a



Hai Rihan, Fragments I, 2000, mixed media on paper, 137.5 x 241 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Luxe Museum.